

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 304 193

JC 890 117

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TITLE Reading and Writing about Literature: Questions and Confidence.
PUB DATE 15 Oct 88
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Community Colleges of Chicago National Literature Conference (3rd, Chicago, IL, October 14-15, 1988).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Community Colleges; *Literature; Literature Appreciation; Reader Response; *Reader Text Relationship; Reading Comprehension; *Reading Skills; *Reading Strategies; Teaching Methods; Two Year Colleges

ABSTRACT

According to Wolfgang Iser's "The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response," the meaning of a literary text is created by each individual reader in response to gaps, or indeterminacies, in the text. With the application of this theory to the two-year college classroom, teachers can show inexperienced readers how to discover the meaning of literature for themselves, instead of passively receiving the teachers' interpretations. The method is particularly useful for students who lack confidence or have difficulty with academic language. The gaps in meaning in a text do not represent a failure of students' understanding or perceptive powers, on the contrary, the gaps become opportunities for students to discover their own creative imagination. Following the steps of this process, the teacher: (1) has each student write out one question about an assigned text; (2) writes out all questions on the black board, with the more global questions first (e.g., What is happening?) and the questions that sum up the text last (e.g., What was the author trying to say?); (3) leads a discussion about the questions without providing answers, so that students see that the questions define the indeterminacies in the text; (4) repeats the process for other texts, showing that while no questions are wrong, some are more useful than others in discovering the meaning of a text; (5) has students create a "gap" question about a text and write an experimental paragraph proposing answers to the question that bridge the gap; (6) has students share their questions and answers in small group discussions; and (7) using the same process, assigns a final formal essay based on a text chosen by each student. The initial bewilderment students feel in the beginning of the process turns into a genuine encounter with meaning. Samples of students' gap questions are provided. (AJL)

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ED304193

READING AND WRITING ABOUT LITERATURE

QUESTIONS AND CONFIDENCE

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October 15, 1988

Paper presented at the Community Colleges of Chicago Third National Literature Conference, October 14-15, 1988, Chicago, Illinois.

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October 15, 1988

Reading and Writing about Literature: Questions and Confidence

Many two-year college students don't understand how the academic system works. It is hard for them to benefit from their courses because they are inexperienced in the kinds of mental activity that academic work depends on. Teachers who are aware of students' difficulties often ask those who do not understand something to ask questions. However, students unfamiliar with this fundamental characteristic of academic language may find an instructor's request for questions difficult to honor.

Asking questions does seem like a public confession of ignorance, of course, but I think a significant additional reason for students' silence is that real-world approaches to learning are often very different from this academic model. My students are more familiar with apprenticeship, repeated practice, and learning by tradition than they are with active questioning. Some of the learning practices common in high school, including rote learning, memorization, passive listening, and a strong focus on the "right answer," present

further stumbling blocks to success in college. These are some of the reasons why many two-year college students find it so challenging to do what David Bartholomae calls "Inventing the University":

The student has to learn to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community. (134)

Freshman composition courses like Writing about Literature, whose activities center on reading and writing, tend to highlight students' difficulties with academic language, the "learning to speak" problem. As one of my students wrote, "I feel like a lost puppy when it comes to writing." Many of my students find it very difficult to use academic English, and in my eagerness to help I sometimes used to add to the problem by trying to tell them what the language was saying to them as they read, or by trying to tell them what to say in it as they wrote.

A practicum on teaching by Dr. Patricia Harkin at The University of Akron showed me a way out of this trap by introducing me to Wolfgang Iser's The Act of Reading. Iser's theories have become the foundation for classroom practices that encourage students to develop a version of academic English for themselves, a permanent tool for learning. I was able to free my students from trying to believe what I was trying to tell

them about what the author was trying to say, once I grasped Iser's concept that the meaning of a literary text is created by each individual reader, in response to gaps, or indeterminacies, in the text. Student readers can learn to recognize gaps in a text, ask themselves appropriate questions about these gaps, and create meaning by proposing bridges, answers to their questions.

This approach defines the borderline between what each individual came to class knowing, and the text. This area is the place where learning is possible, for, as Frank Smith argues in Reading Without Nonsense, we can learn only what intersects in some way with what we already know (xii). Yet my students initially do not seem to see any connections between themselves and the literature in the textbook for our class, Abcarian and Klotz's Literature: The Human Experience. They are sure that they don't know "what the poem means" and make matters worse by assuming, in contrast, that the teacher does. As she agreed to begin the series of gap exercises I assign, one of my students added, "O.K., but on Friday will you tell us what it means?"

Rather than trying to tell students what to think, we can teach them how to approach their lack of certainty as places in the text which inspire readers to think for themselves. Students can become creative readers, asking good questions, proposing answers, and making their own intellectual connections. To quote Frank Smith, "...comprehension is getting these questions answered" (78). One of my students, Charlie

Brady, wrote an effective essay on a poem by Adrienne Rich, beginning with this introduction, which establishes the place where his imagination connected to the text:

I have read "Living in Sin" and have arrived at a gap question that to me needs to be filled. The question I have does not necessarily deal with the woman, but deals more with the man. Why is the man moping around the house; is it because he has been recently laid off? If he is laid off, is that the reason the wife is letting the housework go?

Although it led to a good piece of writing, Charlie described his gap question as "very odd," probably because the class discussion had focused on the woman in the poem. But for Charlie, the issue in reading Rich's poem was quite different; he needed to make meaning with this poem in his own way.

Donald Murray, Peter Elbow, and others have encouraged composition teachers to trust their students' abilities to generate valuable material by freewriting, and to shape this material into powerful, effective essays. Iser's ideas can engender a similar trust in literature teachers, developing our confidence in our students' abilities to make meaning with a literary text. We need this trust to be able to help our students write well. Or, to quote Bartholomae again, we need to extend to our students "the privilege of being 'insiders'--that is, the privilege of being inside an established and powerful discourse and of being granted an especial right to speak" (143). Students with a genuine experience of comprehension will

know that they have the right to speak, because they have something meaningful to say.

One of my students revealed his lack of confidence as the class discussed a writing assignment early in a semester. He asked incredulously, "You mean, you want us to write what we think?" He had made the damaging assumption so many two-year college students seem to make, that he was unable to think about literature. It seems to me that inexperienced readers often tend to interpret the unknown in a text as a personal failure in communication. They seem to believe that if they could read like really smart readers, they would absorb "correctly" everything in a text after one reading, transferring the "main idea" and all supporting details directly from the author's mind to the reader's. Students who have tried to read this way have necessarily failed, and when they do so they experience a sense of intellectual failure, an apparent inability to use academic English, that is a great hindrance to writing well.

However, once students have learned to see gaps, not as failures of their own perceptive powers, but as opportunities for creating meaning, they have a powerful tool for dealing with the unknown. Some of the confidence resulting from the possession of this strategy for reading shows in Brian Smith's journal entry. Reflecting on all the thinking he has done about literature during the semester, Brian shows considerable confidence in his writing and recognizes how thinking about a text's gaps has developed that ability:

You can see [by my journal entries] that I see with my imagination and not my eyes alone. For me an imagination is very important. I can read a story or poem and get the author's meaning, but literature opens a new door for me. I see what they write, and I picture in my mind what I see. They might not be the same, but that's the beauty of it. It's my thoughts, and mine alone. I'm sure others share the same thoughts, but what I imagine stays with me. You might ask, "How did this journal help you with your imagination?" Every time I read a text many GAPS arose. The answer to my questions started with my imagination. I wasn't trying to write what the author would write. I was writing what I knew was mine.

Gaining confidence in their ability to make meaning helps students who initially claim they "aren't good in English" and "don't understand poetry" read literature with pleasure and write well about it. Furthermore, students who can manage their encounters with unknown material are in a better position to take up the challenges their other courses offer them, gradually "inventing the university" for themselves, becoming insiders in the academic community. Learning to ask questions is an essential step in formulating answers for oneself, as an educated person must do.

Another way to describe this issue of confidence, with special reference to literature courses, is to say that before one can write well about a text, obviously one must have read it well. By finding, naming, and discussing the gaps in a text, and proposing answers to those questions, students discover their creative imaginations. As Iser says, they are creating meanings in which they have confidence (219). Making a

connection back to Bartholomae's ideas, one might say that students have, with the gap approach, tried on one of academia's most important ways of knowing, asking questions. They will now have a place to begin, a valid understanding of some part of a text, and a valuable message to impart in their writing. They will have begun to solve what Bartholomae calls "the problem of establishing authority, of defining a position from which one may speak" (157). They can begin to write well about literature, fusing their own voices with the forms and structures of academic English.

Iser's theories on the role of gaps in creating meaning have had a profound effect on my students' abilities to write about literature. I will explain what I do in the classroom to put those theories into action, but to make sense of these activities, I need first to describe the concept of gaps in more detail. Iser emphasizes the effect of the unknown on the process of comprehension:

The whole process of comprehension is set in motion by the need to familiarize the unfamiliar (and literature would be barren indeed if it led only to a recognition of the already familiar). In short, the reader will only begin to search for (and so actualize) the meaning if he does not know it, and so it is the unknown factors in the text that set him off on his quest. (43)

As we read a novel (the genre Iser discusses), story, play, or poem, we notice places where things are not said, places

where meaning is not directly told, or determined, by the words of the text. Iser labels these places gaps, or indeterminacies (59-60). I see these unknown factors as the source of much initial difficulty in comprehension for inexperienced readers. Yet, according to Iser, the indeterminacies should "set the reader off on his quest," not compel him or her to abandon it. The introductory paragraphs of Amy Eyster's paper describe the beginning of her quest for meaning, in response to an indeterminacy in a text:

In reading James Thurber's short story "The Greatest Man in the World," I fell into a large hole in the text that made very little sense to me at the time, and that hole became my gap question. I began to make meaning with the story in my own way and came to terms with my feelings over different aspects of it. Only then was I able to pull myself up out of that hole.

The hole in the text seemed to be the actions of the government officials versus what they were really thinking and feeling towards Jacky Smurch. I kept thinking to myself, "Why all the hypocrisy?" Every last one of those men held some kind of loathing towards Jacky Smurch, yet they carried on the charade as though he really were a hero, even going so far as to coach him on the proper etiquette and behavior of a hero, so Smurch would not fall on his face and reveal himself for what he really was--a low-life scum who, by some stroke of fate, had been thrown into the limelight. Why, then, were these dignitaries so interested in "Pal" Smurch? Why did they play the game of pretending for so long, when obviously not a one of them gave two hoots about America's new "boy wonder," and, on the contrary, wished him ill will?

I mulled these questions over in my mind time and time again until I could make the pieces of this puzzle fit together, if only in my own mind. The conclusion I came up with was frightening, but, I am sorry to say, was also quite truthful, at least from my point of view.

Amy's paper illustrates Iser's point that we seem to have a natural craving for a "resolution of indeterminacies" (60); however, we also must recognize, especially clearly in the case of a wild flight of fancy like Thurber's story, that there cannot be a simple connection between a literary text and the real world, one "given frame of reference" as Iser calls it, for the instructor to explicate. Amy needed to discover for herself what gaps were at issue, and she also needed to propose her own bridges for those gaps. Until she had fallen into "that hole" as she read, she didn't need to make meaning to pull herself out; it would be counterproductive for an instructor to try to make a text's indeterminacies into plain and simple determinacies by force of lecturing about the "real meaning." Literary texts are not maps of the "real" world but representations of worlds created by the author's imagination. The act of comprehension is not analogous to making a correct connection to a "given frame of reference," outside the text. Iser explains:

"...[B]y definition, for fiction there can be no such given frames of reference. On the contrary, the reader must first discover for himself the code underlying the text, and this is tantamount to bringing out the meaning. The process of discovery is itself a linguistic action in so far as it constitutes the means by which the reader may communicate with the text. (60)

This active model of reading is much more fulfilling than

the passive one my students begin to shed as they progress through the course. Rather than getting a hidden meaning out from under that rock the author seems mysteriously to have laid on it, they learn to do what real reading is: communicating with a text. The code for making meaning is not the author's, and certainly not the teacher's; it is the reader's own discovery and creation. Once a student has begun to create it, he or she gains authority, an inside position in academia, and the right to speak to us academics (including classmates) in our own language.

This language, academic English, has flexibility and individuality, emanating from and suiting a variety of students. They can choose their own points of entry into meaning-making as they frame their gaps into questions that turn back on and grow from each other. As Iser describes this process, "meaning gathers meaning in a kind of snowballing process" (67). As the process begins to become apparent to students, it is no longer necessary to encourage them to apply ideas found in literature to their own lives; their reading produces its own form of reality. Iser explains:

In literature, where the reader is constantly feeding back reactions as he obtains new information, there is... a continual process of realization, and so reading itself 'happens' like an event, in the sense that what we read takes on the character of an open-ended situation, at one and the same time concrete and yet fluid.... Reading, then, is experienced as something which is happening--and happening is the hallmark of reality. (68)

In other words, thinking about Iser's theories helped me articulate to myself what I already knew about reading, and what I hope to help my students discover, that what matters is what happens when we read. Literature has aesthetic value; it is beautiful; and its beauty resides in its influence over readers. As Iser says, "Aesthetic value, then, is like the wind--we know of its existence only through its effects" (70). Readers cannot comprehend in this way by being passively told, for genuine knowledge about a text comes only from genuine reading experiences. The only discoveries we really care about are those we make for ourselves. The meanings we thus discover are the effects, the aesthetic value of a text, and the topics of our essays.

Literature doesn't work by "giving us some tips on how to live," as inexperienced writers often tell us. Rather, it presents opportunities to achieve what Iser calls "the imaginary correction of deficient realities" (85). Bridging gaps in the text has an effect on the reader--it affects "the reader's own store of past experience" as the connections are made between what is already known and what is becoming a new part of the reader's world, the answers which really happen, as a real result of reading.

So how does this theory operate in the classroom? After several weeks of writing free paraphrases and simply making the class as comfortable with literature as possible, I assign a

relatively thorny text, William Blake's "London." At the beginning of class I ask everyone to write down one question about the poem and collect them. I then write all twenty-five questions on the blackboard, without identifying who wrote which one. I try to put the more global questions at the beginning: "What is happening?" "Does there seem to be a war, or what?" One can usually arrange questions relating to specific parts of the text in order: "What are mind-forged manacles?" "What is a marriage-hearse?" "I don't get the last part" --and then squeeze in the summing-up ones at the end: "What was the author trying to say?" "Why is everyone so sad?" "What was the poem all about?" Or even, from a particularly outspoken student, "What the hell is the poem all about?"

It takes about fifteen minutes to write all this, but my students are usually so interested in everyone's questions that they don't mind waiting. With luck they'll start discussing the questions while I'm still putting them on the board, but if not, I lead a discussion, being careful not to answer any of the questions. Usually the issues in one question relate to or illuminate the issues in another. However well this initial experience goes, at least someone in the room cares about each topic we mention. The goal is for students to see how the questions define the indeterminacies in the text. They can also begin to learn that gaps differ; places in the text which seem quite clear, or not interesting, to one student, seem central to others. The issues of familiarity and unfamiliarity vary, in

other words.

We go through this process with different texts for several more class periods, and I try to show, not which questions are wrong, but which questions are relatively more useful in the meaning-making process. "What was the author trying to say?" of course, is a classic but fruitless question. The only thing that matters is what the author did say, to each individual. My students find it both interesting and encouraging to discover that different issues occur to different readers. One fascinating question about Kafka's "A Hunger Artist" asked, "Was fasting as popular in America as it was in Europe?" Usually my students forget that during all of this they still haven't found out what the teacher thinks. With luck they'll just stop caring.

The next step is to ask students to create a gap question about a particular poem--Adrienne Rich's "Living in Sin" works well--and write an experimental paragraph proposing ways to bridge that gap. In small groups, students share the results and consider how each person's writing might be expanded into an essay. For the actual formal essay they choose a text from the syllabus and follow that same process.

Initial bewilderment turns into a genuine encounter with meaning. As they write, my students mark the limits of their knowledge, work on the next step appropriate for themselves, have a good time arguing with their classmates, and produce fascinating essays. It is rewarding for me to see this process

take place; I seriously considered not writing a paper myself at all for this conference but just reading a batch of essays so you could enjoy them as I do. Iser's theories, when I first read them, seemed dry and abstruse; yet their application leads to a simple, apparently natural strategy for making meaning. Its mastery is a real step forward for many of my students.

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GAP QUESTIONS

LONDON

1. Was there a war going on at the time? If so what war?
2. It seems he's talking about the poor living conditions of the time. I understand the children crying, but don't understand the chimney sweepers cry.
3. Why are the people crying in 2nd stanza?
4. Why was everyone so sad and bitter?
5. Are the children crying because of the war? What does the "marriage-hearse" mean?
6. What is the sadness the people are feeling?
7. What does he mean in the last stanza? Were they fighting the Germans? What does a chimney sweep have to do with the war?
8. What is meant by the "marriage-hearse" and "blights with plagues the marriage-hearse"?
9. Why the change from the notebook version and the final one (social acceptability)?
10. Why is everyone sad?
11. He's talking about a war, sounds despairing--was he a soldier? What war was taking place?

LIVING IN SIN

1. What did the studio have to do with this poem and her sin? What did the first stanza mean?
2. I guess I wonder why this poem would be called "Living in Sin"?
3. What is the significance of letting the coffee pot boil over on the stove?
4. Where did "he" go during the day while she stayed at home cleaning the apartment? Why did she feel like the milkman?
5. What is the Persian shawl on the piano?
6. What makes this girl care about some things more than others?
7. What are the pair of beetle eyes that fix on her?
8. What was the reference to "three sepulchral beetles"?
9. Is "she" having an affair with the milkman?
10. Was the poem about the desperation alcohol puts in a relationship?
11. Is the woman in the poem worried that she is committing a heresy or that other people think she is "Living in Sin"?
12. Was the milkman the lover or suspicion of the man who left for cigarettes?

Assignment Sheet for the Gap Paper

Many gaps could be created in each text we have studied. During class discussion we've explored a wide range of gaps, questions about a text. Some gaps, for example gaps relating to the meaning of a word, may be fairly easy to bridge, but other gaps are difficult, or even impossible, to solve.

Your assignment for the Gap Paper is to find a gap which interests you in one of the texts we have read this semester. Write an essay at least 500 words long showing your classmates what this gap is and how you have tried to bridge it.

Perhaps you will finally discover a way of bridging your gap that is satisfying to you. Or perhaps several different ways of making meaning will occur to you. Your essay does not have to single out one "best" way of reading; instead, explain what possibilities you have discovered.

Often one gap leads to another. This series of gaps may lead you to interesting ways of thinking about the text you have chosen to work on.

Another way of developing this approach to reading is to ask yourself what your way of bridging a gap might mean, when you reread the rest of the text. In other words, try stepping back from your ideas about one aspect of the text to consider what these ideas may mean in terms of the remaining parts of the story or poem. This approach is a good way of generating more material if your first draft is too short.

Remember how differently we all read the same text. As you write, keep referring back to the specific words of the text to show how your ideas relate to it.

For practice in using direct quotation correctly, include at least one direct quotation from the text in your essay (see section 16 of Harbrace).

If you "get stuck" or "can't think of enough to write," try some of the techniques for generating ideas: paraphrasing, writing an affective or associative response, or looping.

Before you type your final draft, check it carefully for correctness. Read the whole paper out loud to help catch muddled sentences and fragments. Consider the corrections made on your Response Paper as you edit this essay.